

African golden cat (*Caracal aurata*)



Also known as: golden cat
Synonyms: *Felis aurata*

French: Chat Doré, Chat Doré Africain
Spanish: Gato Dorado

Kingdom Animalia
Phylum Chordata
Class Mammalia
Order Carnivora
Family Felidae
Genus *Caracal* (1)
Size Head-body length: 61 – 101.5 cm (2)
Weight 5.5 – 16 kg (2)

STATUS

The African golden cat is classified as Near Threatened (NT) on the IUCN Red List (1) and listed on Appendix II of CITES (2).

DESCRIPTION

The African golden cat (*Caracal aurata*) is little known by science, but is the subject of much tribal superstition in many parts of Africa (3). Pygmy tribes in Cameroon carry the tail of the African golden cat when hunting elephants to ensure good fortune, and the skin is used in some areas during circumcision rituals (3). The African golden cat is about twice the size of a large domestic cat and is robustly built with a short tail. Despite its name, the fur varies from marmalade orange-red to sepia-grey and may be spotted all over, unspotted or somewhere in between (3). Captive specimens have been known to change from grey to red and vice versa and this may also occur in the wild (2). The throat, chest and undersides are white or whitish, and the belly is marked with bold dark spots or blotches (3). Its round face has a heavy muzzle, and the small, blunt, un-tufted ears have black backs (3). Males are larger and heavier than females (3). The African golden cat is also known as the 'leopard's brother' as local people believe it follows the leopard (3).

RANGE

The African golden cat occurs in the tropical rainforest region of equatorial Africa; from Senegal, Sierra Leone and Liberia, west through the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of Congo, south to northern Angola, and east to Uganda and Kenya (3).

HABITAT

Primarily inhabits lowland, moist forest, but the African golden cat also occurs in recently logged forest along rivers, and in mountainous areas in bamboo forest and alpine moorland (2) (3).

BIOLOGY

Little is known about the biology of the African golden cat, which has a fierce reputation with local people (3). It is a terrestrial hunter that has been seen hunting in the daytime, but based on the activity of its preferred prey it is more likely to be **crepuscular** and **nocturnal** (3). It feeds mostly on small mammals, such as rats and hyraxes, and birds which are plucked before eating (3). It also takes monkeys, and its long, heavy jaw enables it to tackle powerfully built duikers (2). The African golden cat has also been known to raid chicken coops and kill domestic goats and sheep (3).

The African golden cat is solitary, and like other felids, it is likely to maintain territories, marked with scent and faeces (3). Captive animals have been recorded giving birth to litters of two kittens, after a gestation of 75 days (3), although in the wild one kitten per litter seems to be more common (4). The new born kittens are well hidden in a fallen, hollow log or a similar concealed den (2) (3). Their eyes open after six days, and they then develop quickly; walking at 13 days and eating whole animals shortly after 40 days (3).

THREATS

The lack of biological and population information means it is hard to determine the status of the African golden cat in the wild (4). However, its habitat and prey populations are known to be contracting (2). The moist forests of West Africa have been heavily degraded and the remaining areas are patchily distributed (4). 'Savannization', a process in which forest is turned into savanna as a result of slash-and-burn agriculture and logging, has probably led to population declines and fragmentation (4). There is some hunting of the African golden cat, as cat skins regularly appear in markets (2), and hunting of small antelopes decreases the cats' prey (4). African golden cats are also killed while raiding poultry sheds or going after domestic sheep and goats (3).

CONSERVATION

The African golden cat is listed on Appendix II of the Convention in International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), which means that international trade should be carefully monitored to ensure it is compatible with the species' survival (5). Hunting of the golden cat is prohibited in 12 of its range countries, and hunting regulations exist in Gabon, Liberia and Togo (4). Also, despite the forest loss and prey depletion occurring in much of its range, the African golden cat is reported to exist in secondary forest and survive on small rodents, and thus may be in less danger of extinction as some other small cats (3). In addition, large areas of relatively pristine forest still exist in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Congo and Gabon (4). Hopefully action can be taken before this beautiful cat and the remarkably diverse forests it inhabits decline further.

FIND OUT MORE

For further information on the African golden cat see:

- The Cat Survival Trust:
www.catsurvivaltrust.org
- International Society for Endangered Cats:
www.wildcatconservation.org

AUTHENTICATION

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GLOSSARY

- **Crepuscular:** active at dusk and/or dawn.
- **Nocturnal:** active at night.

REFERENCES

1. IUCN Red List (June, 2009)
<http://www.iucnredlist.org>
2. Kingdon, J. (1997) *The Kingdon Field Guide to African Mammals*. Academic Press, London.
3. Sunquist, M. and Sunquist, F. (2002) *Wild Cats of the World*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
4. Nowell, K. and Jackson, P. (1996) *Wild Cats Status Survey and Conservation Action Plan*. IUCN, Gland, Switzerland.
5. CITES (June, 2007)
<http://www.cites.org>